

INVITED EDITORIAL

In the Beginning...

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Our Society's incoming editor of this *Journal* assumes his responsibilities on the ~50th anniversary of the first issue of the *Journal*. Its origins were humble. A group interested in discussing the desirability and feasibility of establishing a society devoted to the subject of human genetics met in Chicago in 1947, during the annual meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS). In those days, most of the professional scientific societies, including the Genetics Society of America, met at the same time and place, under the general mantle of the AAAS. Approximately 150 persons, drawn from the membership of the various societies represented at the AAAS meeting, attended this discussion (Muller 1949). Obviously, the decision was to form such a society. This decision was not reached without considerable discussion, with several of the group maintaining that it would be better to function as a section within the Genetics Society of America, thus enabling the human geneticist to more easily maintain contact with the experimental geneticist. The first formal meeting of the new Society occurred in 1948. There seems to be no record of the number of persons in attendance at this and other early meetings, but it could not have been more than a few hundred. By contrast, at last count, the membership of the American Society of Human Genetics was 6,628, with some 4,700 members in attendance at the annual meeting of 1998.

The subject of a journal came up at that very first informal meeting. There were really too few persons at that organizational meeting to assume the responsibilities of a journal, and it would be a brave press that would consider publishing a journal with no more of an assured subscription base than that which this meeting's attendance suggested.

Herluf Strandskov, the first secretary-treasurer of the Society and a faculty member of the University of Chi-

cago, volunteered to take a lead role in negotiations with The University of Chicago Press; he somehow succeeded in persuading them to take us on. All these negotiations took a little time, as did finding an editor, deciding on the format of the *Journal*, and attracting a sufficient number of quality manuscripts with which to form a respectable first volume of the *Journal*.

Nevertheless, just 1 year after the Society was founded, the first issue of the *Journal* appeared in September 1949. The University of Chicago Press must have lost money on the first four or five volumes, but, by now, given the present membership, it must have fully recouped those early losses.

The first editor of the *Journal* was Charles Cotterman. Cotterman and I were then colleagues at the Heredity Clinic of the University of Michigan, and I can attest to the long hours he devoted to editing some of the early articles, in which the material was good but the genetic treatment was somewhat naive. He had limited secretarial support from the secretary of the Clinic, but, basically, Charley, with the appropriate advice of his editorial board (C. Nash Herndon, Madge T. Macklin, Horace W. Norton, Bronson Price, Norma Ford Walker, and Alexander S. Wiener), did it all.

Most of the early articles in the *Journal* involved clinical genetics, but there also appeared H. J. Muller's monumental paper on "Our Load of Mutations" (1950). Of course, none of us had any inkling of the genetic revolution that would be initiated by the Watson-Crick (1953) hypothesis of the structure of DNA. I suggest that it would be a salubrious experience for the new generation of human geneticists, working on the various aspects of human molecular genetics, to take some time—maybe half an hour—to go to their libraries and look at the first few volumes of this *Journal*. Those early issues will remind you of how dramatically the content of the study of human genetics was to change in the next half century. (In the most recent issue of the *American Journal of Human Genetics* [September 1999] to come to hand, 24 of the 29 articles are primarily the product of the molecular-genetics approach.)

My own contribution to the first issue of the *Journal* was an article on the detection of the genetic carriers of hereditary disease (Neel 1949). A carrier was defined

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either as an apparently normal person who, in fact, carried the gene responsible for a specific disease but who would not have clinical disease develop for several years or even decades, or as the carrier of a “recessive” gene, a heterozygote, in whom the disease will never develop. I could find, in all the literature, only 34 possible examples of such disease—not all of which, I am sorry to say, have stood the test of time. No subject has benefited more from the advent of the biochemical and DNA-based approaches than has this one. We can now detect the carrier state for any gene whose protein product has been characterized or whose DNA sequence and disease-causing alleles have been established. At present, the number of diseases for which a carrier state has been established must be ~1,000. The increase in this number is accompanied by a proportionate increase in the number of potential ethical/practical issues that these developments create, as is exemplified by the presence of cystic fibrosis among the recessive disorders and of the trinucleotide-repeat neurological diseases among diseases of late onset.

So, the situation today is very different from the situation 50 years ago. Genetics has become the queen of the biomedical sciences. The problem facing the editor is not how to groom the relatively few manuscripts being submitted but, rather, how to choose the best among the many available manuscripts. The *Journal* right now is

first class, but can we make it even better? For instance, can we attract (and publicize) manuscripts involving human genetics similar to those that now appear in *Science*, *Nature*, and the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*? How the new editor will proceed remains to be seen. Meanwhile, we, the members of the American Society of Human Genetics, can only wish Steve Warren all possible success as he begins his 5-year tenure as editor, and, when called upon, give him our utmost assistance.

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